Sunday, May 10, 1998
THE MOTHERHOOD OF GOD
John 13:31-35

I don't know about you, but in my spiritual journey, it is many times helpful for me to imagine God as a loving mother in addition to thinking of God as a loving father.

So, for example, sometimes when I say the Lord's Prayer, I substitute the word "mother" for "father" in the opening sentence. And there's that old hymn, which is one of my favorites, "FAITH OF OUR FATHERS." Last week, I found myself singing it to myself and noticed that I had unconsciously changed the words of the first line. I was singing, "Faith of our mothers living still." I suppose it was my way of looking ahead to this Mother's Day sermon.

Switching the words from time to time helps me to remember that in talking about God and talking with God, we human beings use metaphors, and no metaphor is perfect. But it's one of the ways we make God more personal and understandable.

I was talking with a Roman Catholic priest last week, and he told me that he believes one of the reasons that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is so important in his tradition is that it is a reminder that God's love for us and for creation is like that of a loving mother, as much as it is like that of a loving father.

Kathleen Norris, in her new book AMAZING GRACE, makes the same point. Although she is a member of a Protestant Church, she said that for years Mary, the mother of Jesus, was more or less invisible to her. Along with the angels of the Nativity, Mary was one of the decorations her family unpacked every year for Christmas — a strange but welcome seasonal presence who would be relegated to the closet again at the new year. However, as her faith continued to mature, Kathleen says she became aware that Mary is important to her because she helps enlarge her concept of the loving God.

Along the way, she was surprised to learn from her study of the Bible that the lovely Magnificat she sang in the choir—"My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior"—was the song of Mary in Luke's story of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. It was one pregnant woman's response to a blessing from another. Equally important, the words of the Magnificat are a poetic rendering of a theme that pervades the entire biblical narrative — when God comes into our midst, it is to upset the status quo. Indeed, for some of us, to think of God using feminine imagery does upset the status quo. But that's good, because in many ways, God's love for us is very much like that of a mother's love for her children.

Last week, someone told me about a revelatory experience in O'Hare Airport in Chicago. It was wintertime. My friend had gone to the airport to meet someone. It was a gloomy Chicago day, and he was feeling lonely and depressed. As he waited in the airport, he noticed a young mother cradling her baby in her arms. The look on this mother's face was filled with adoration and love. She couldn't take her eyes off the child as she held the baby close. My friend kept watching her. After a time, she became aware of his presence. She looked up and smiled and then returned to looking at her baby. He said it was the most beautiful and loving smile he could remember. His mood was lifted. That evening, he was having dinner with friends. They noticed the joy in him and asked what happened. He said, "Today at the airport, I saw the Madonna. Today at the airport, I saw the love of God in a mother and her baby."

In the scripture reading for today, Jesus is talking with his remaining disciples after Judas has left the room to betray him. Like a loving mother on her deathbed, Jesus says to them, “Little children, I am with you only a little longer.”

You can almost imagine a mother bidding her children goodbye. Gathered around her bed in a crumbling farmhouse, the younger ones, wide-eyed, clutch cornshuck dolls and wipe their noses on their sleeves. The older ones try to be brave but are unable to keep an occasional tear from spilling and washing wet tracks down their dirty cheeks.

“Little children,” says Jesus, “you will look for me, but where I am going you cannot come.”

Even the youngest ones sense that something is dreadfully wrong. The tears begin to flow freely. The baby drops her rattle and begins to wail.

“I give you a new commandment,” Jesus says, “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

With a brave smile and a trembling voice, the mother says, “I won’t be around to take care of you much longer. You will have to take care of each other, watch out for each other, and most of all, love each other. Promise?”

“By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples,” Jesus concludes, making his most important point yet, “if you have love for one another.”

My mother died suddenly almost 28 years ago in August 1970, and therefore, it was not possible for my sisters and brother to be at her bedside so that she could give us her final reminders, as Jesus did for his disciples. But if it had been possible, I have often wondered what she would have said.

Before I tell you what I think she would have said, I want you to consider in your mind what your mother would say to you, or what you would say to your children if they were able to be gathered around you in the last minutes of your life. What final advice would you give them?

I believe my mother would have said almost the same thing that Jesus said, but in different words. It would have gone something like this: “There’s one thing I want you to remember above all else after I die: love one another. As I have loved you, you also should love each other, and I hope you will practice unconditional love toward all people.” This is also what my wife and I would say to our children.

But not all mothers and fathers are as loving as we would expect. There was a story in the news back in February that shocked all of us who read it or heard it. On February 19, a car sped across the grassy median of Interstate 95 near West Palm Beach into southbound traffic, then back into the northbound lanes. At least three people reported seeing a woman throw her infant son through the driver’s window. When questioned by police, Krisann Haddad said she would “rather have her child dead than in this world.”

We are shocked that a mother would try to take the life of her own child. Normally, it is just the opposite: a mother will lay down her own life rather than see her child come to any harm. In the story in the Old Testament in 1 Kings, Solomon, the wise king of Israel, depends on that truth to settle a dispute between two mothers.

One of them tells the story: she and the other woman were living in the same house. They gave birth to sons within days of each other. One night, the other woman discovered that her child had died, took the first woman's living child, and replaced him with her dead son.

The first woman tells the king, "When I rose in the morning to nurse my son, I saw that he was dead; but when I looked at him closely in the morning, clearly it was not the son I had borne." The king is asked to settle the case. Who is the real mother? How can he tell? By testing the strength of love.

"Bring me a sword," he says calmly, and when he proposes to divide the living child and give half to each woman, the real mother protests, "Please, my lord, give her the living boy; certainly do not kill him!" But the other mother coolly responds, "It shall be neither yours nor mine; divide it." (Notice the language: the real mother refers to her son as "the living boy," while the other woman refers to him as "it.")

"Give the first woman the living boy," Solomon says, his voice full of sympathy. "Do not kill him. She is his mother." How did he know? Her identity was revealed by her love.

Just as Solomon was able to discern the true identity of a mother by her love for her child, so will the world be able to identify the true disciples of Jesus by their love for one another.

All of these stories tell us again that God's love can be compared to that of a loving mother for her children, and that we are to love each other in the same way.

Of course, all this advice about loving one another is easier said than done. It's easy to advocate love in general, but when you get specific, it's much more difficult. In another place in the Bible, when Jesus said that we are to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves, someone asked him, "Who is my neighbor?" When Jesus defined "neighbor" in the parable of the Good Samaritan as being someone you would never even think of associating with in any way, some of his listeners were not so sure about loving their neighbors.

It's not as easy as it sounds. It all depends on your definition of neighbor and your understanding of love. When Jesus talked about love, he was defining it as something much more than emotional feeling or even being a close friend with someone.

He was talking about action, about treating other people with respect. He was also talking about crossing many of the artificial boundaries we create. When the Samaritan stopped to take care of the injured Jew by the roadside, he was crossing a boundary that was taboo. Samaritans and Jews were not supposed to talk with each other, much less touch each other or help each other. However, in the biblical tradition, justice is a form of love.

Love is more than feeling; it is action. When people who have just performed some heroic, life-threatening deed in order to save another are asked how they "felt" about what they were doing while they were doing it, the reply is usually, "nothing."

Here's a stranger who helped pull three children out of a burning house: "I didn't even think about it. It was happening so fast, and I knew we had to get them out of there." Here's a mother who lifts a tree off her son's leg: "I didn't even notice how heavy it was — until I put it down." When love and compassion for another take over completely, it is expressed through actions, not feelings. You cannot gradually and cautiously feel your way toward a loving action.

Love is action. Genuine love always leaps before it looks. God's love for us is, above all, love in action.

God so loved the world and us that God acted. God came and lived among us in the person of Jesus.

I believe this is the kind of love we celebrate on Mother's Day. Love in action is the force behind all those meals mom prepared, all those goodnight books read to sleepy and not-so-sleepy children by a tired mom. Mothers do all these things many times when they don't particularly feel like doing them.

I want to conclude this Mother's Day sermon by quoting from a eulogy that David R. Cook delivered at the funeral of his mother, Nelle Reed Cook, because it has something to say about many of our mothers.

"Mother's life was a testimony to struggle to rise above the limitations of her childhood. She was emotionally rejected by her father, whom she remembers saying to her as a little girl, with a snap of his fingers, 'You aren't worth five cents.' But her father was a man of great honesty, respected in his community, and loyal to his family...and before he died many years ago, he apologized to her and asked for forgiveness. He did the best he knew."

"But mother suffered a lifelong insecurity about her core sense of self-worth. I believe it was that insecurity that led her to be such a controlling person...Mother was not an easy person to live with. All of us children and many of the grandchildren have felt at one time or another the frustration, the sting of her personality."

"I tell you these things at her funeral because to honor and celebrate her life means to celebrate and honor all of it. Our parents invested us with a deep sense of honesty and integrity...Honesty makes it important to me that my mother not be simply regarded as a saint, as I'm sure some people feel she is. Though such a thought does honor to mother's memory, to make her a saint in some sense diminishes her considerable humanity."

"The religion of mother's childhood was a dark, vindictive, and judgmental religion that did not seem to hold much in the way of redemption and grace. When, in the middle of her life, she began to encounter a different vision of God, personified for her in Christ Jesus, it began a healing process in her inner life that allowed her, in time, to feel her own value and worth as a child of God."

"She tried to live her life, especially the last twenty-five years, in tune with the infinite. She sought God's guidance on all matters in her life. Nothing was excluded from this, and while this could make for some frustrating feelings in dealing with her, what seems remarkable to me is how often her guidance made sense, how often the pieces fell together."

"The perfect mother and the perfect father do not exist in this life, and I am glad for that. No child could stand them or get free from them. But the mother of whom you can say she loved you unconditionally, she gave you a sense of purpose in life, and she showed you what it means to live faithfully, to age courageously, and to die at peace with herself — that is all the mother of any child could hope for. That is the mother we had. Thank you, mother, for being just who you were, and thanks be to God for her life."

I only want to add my thanks to God for my own mother and for mothers everywhere, and my thanks to God for loving us like a mother. Amen.